

AT RIGHT ANGLES WITH CUPID

Si the Hired Man's Misfortunes
in Hunting for a Helpmeet

By HUGH PENDEXTER

IN all my experience as school-teacher in "Deestrick" No. 6 and in all my observations while boarding with Methuel Currier's family I found no more interesting character than Si the hired man. I no sooner had classed him as an ignoramus than I discovered that he was a poet. I had not done pitying him for his lack of initiative when I found he possessed a most dogged spirit of perseverance, or as they styled it in that Western Maine neighborhood, "stick-to-it-iveness."

It was while trying to classify and explain these many phases of his character that I saw him at his best—in love. In my ten weeks' isolation from town and college life I had largely forgotten that Dan Cupid is ever busy, and Si's proclamation that he had fallen a victim to the little god's barbed arrows took me by surprise.

Ever since I had met the hired man behind the hay barn, to chasten his rustic egotism by a half-Nelson, he had evinced a friendly disposition to me and had availed himself of my sophomore wisdom on several occasions. But his amours came to my notice through his borrowing my best suit of clothes, without asking permission, and wearing them over to Otisville as a trump card against the teasing wiles of a local belle.

"I told him ter take 'em, teacher," explained Mrs. Currier. "I knowed yer wouldn't care if it was th' means of winnin' him a wife; an' clothes sartainly do help. I remember I was first taken with Methuel when I saw him at a camp-meetin' an' he was wearin' a red hanker. How it did set him off! I hooked it inter a rug, that one in th' front room. But Si'll bring 'em back jest as good as he got 'em. If they're rumpled I'll press 'em out spick an' span. He put on jest a dash of 'fumery, but I guess yer won't mind that." And she laughed lightly at the idea of my taking offense to the dash of "fumery."

I did not like it, however; but as she gave me to understand that like a bold gambler Si was to venture all on one throw of the dice, I said nothing and awaited the issue. If he lost, I intended prohibiting his wearing my clothes on another occasion. I was young and not more selfish than the average lower classman in a small college; but I feared the good people of the district might absorb the impression that I was wearing Si's clothes, and not vice versa.

And Si lost. In the morning, as I was preparing to leave for my school, he took me aside and with melancholy visage explained how it all happened.

"I could have took my affidavit that them clothes would have fetched her. Yes, sir-ee! As I caught a look at myself in th' carriage-house winder I said: 'Si, ye're all but married.' Why, I could even hear weddin'-bells when I slipped on Johnson's stone wall an' barked th' right leg of yer pants." The last was slightly apologetic, for my trousers were sadly "barked" and more than offset any advantage resulting from the odor of village store perfume radiating from the coat.

"An' she was impressed," continued Si. "She never acted less offish, an' I was beginnin' ter feel at home an' was about ter put th' question, when who should come in but Lije Jessup, rigged out in a new band uniform. Say, ye don't happen ter have any band regalia up in yer trunk, do ye? or a Odd Fellow's suit, or a Knights of Pythias uniform, eh? I thought not, as I didn't happen ter see any. Well, it's too bad. Yer clothes are good enough fer th' average occasion, mind ye, but of course they don't cut much of a figger beside regimentals."

"An' Lije looked showy, I'll admit. Ye see, fer th' last two weeks he's been drivin' up ter see



"When I Rap Twice on Yer Door, That'll Mean
It's All Hunky-dory"

her on his new hearse, an' several times she's gone ter ride with him. He drives th' hearse same as his father did, ye know. Only he's bought a new one, a stunner. I s'pose she couldn't resist th' combination; for when last night he asked her ter go ter a band concert, with ice-cream in th' church vestry afterwards, she excused herself an' left me with her mother. Mother's a good woman, mind ye, but I wasn't a gunnin' fer a parent. An' when she started in ter tell me how many of her family had died of cancer I got up an' quit."

"It's the man, Si, not the clothes, that wins a woman," I said in my youthful wisdom and with the ulterior motive of discouraging further loans from my wardrobe.

"I think ye're wrong, teacher," he replied sadly. "If I wa'n't cut out by-eight gilt buttons, two yaller stripes an' a brass horn, no man ever was. Why, strip Lije Jessup of his uniform an' hearse an' he's th' most onery mortal ye ever see. He's all bent out o' shape."

The next day he sought me in my room and pursued the subject by inquiring why it was that some families seemed destined to be crossed in love. He named families that were given to accumulating wealth, families noted for a deep interest in things educational, and families with some particular brand of religion as a hobby. And he concluded by saying that his family ever had been known for only one characteristic, and that was the unhappy knack of being unfortunate in love. My efforts to prove this a delusion failed to satisfy him, and after he left me I heard him whistling down in the field as he followed the oxen in fall ploughing, and the plaintive notes of the "Mocking-bird" were given a decadent twist that sounded most dreary and hopeless in the clear autumnal air. Then it was that I began to pity him and his life sentence to drudgery on a rocky Maine farm. I even forgave him for wearing my clothes.

But if I expected that Lije's master-stroke would cause him to withdraw from the matrimonial race I erred. Even when Mr. Currier announced at the breakfast-table that the Otisville girl and Lije were about to be married, Si did not relinquish his attack on the baked beans, but merely paused, knife half raised, to remark: "If picter albums will furnish a parlor, she's all fitted out. I've give her four. Lawd! what a fool I was ter waste shoe-leather sittin' her up! Never really cared nothin' about her, mind ye. But I'll admit I thought I did."

From then he began to mend in spirits, and his repeated absence after the chores were done led me to believe there was another attraction, and a local one; for he never took the horse and carriage. One day, when the "Mocking-bird" was being given with the liveliest of variations, I gently quizzed him, and with a grin he opened his heart,

after taking me out back of the corn-crib, and explained the situation.

"I never was really in love till now," he began. "Now I know I'm all right. That Otisville girl wa'n't my style; but Elviney is. Kindly don't say nothin' ter Methuel or his wife, as I expect ter be leavin' here soon. Hate like sin ter quit Meth, an' I know he'll be pestered ter git a man what'll understand his ways of feedin' stock like I do. Why, that roan mare of his, th' one that trots forward an' runs her hind feet, won't let nobody but me touch a curry-comb ter her. But business is business."

"Going to leave? Going to buy a farm?" I inquired.

"Not exactly buy one; but it's jest th' same. Ye see, Elviney's father fell from his mowin'-machine last summer an' has been stiff-legged ever since. Has ter hop around on two crutches. He's all right on high rocky ground; but on med-

der-land he gits stuck an' has ter be pulled out. When Elviney an' me are married I'll go there of course ter run th' farm. We'll divide up th' work; him attendin' ter th' orchard an' side-hill pasture, an' me fussin' with th' intervale an' medder. I've thought it all over an' I've made up my mind ter slave along fer her sake in th' low mucky places with work enough ter kill a ox, while he can kind of loll back on th' high, dry, comfortable spots with nothin' ter do."

As the days passed I saw that Si really had encountered his grand passion. True to my promise, I did not tell the Curriers of his hopes, although I did endeavor in an underhanded way to discover who "Elviney" was. But while my gossiping with Mrs. Currier revealed several spinsters of that name, and three of them had maimed parents, I could not decide who was who. One day he called me to his room, where he was surreptitiously packing some of his personal effects in an old hair-trunk, and with a great show of secrecy motioned for me to close the door.

"Jest gittin' a few of my traps tergether. It's gittin' that close now that I may ask her any night. Don't want Meth ter know till th' last minute, ye see, as I'd hate ter sit across th' table from him an' meet his eyes. I'd imagine I could see sorer in 'em an' reproach. Besides, I couldn't expect Mrs. Currier ter be th' same. So, least said, soonest mended, an' I'll break th' news like a blow an' git away before they can sense it. As I've been here ten years an' am jest like one of th' family, I guess that would be kindest."

"Then she has accepted you?" I whispered, noting the alert gleam in his usually dull eyes.

He rubbed his stubby chin for a few seconds and pulled at the ends of his long yellow mustache. Then he replied slowly, and the light faded a bit: "Why, not exactly. Ye see, I ain't asked her. I'm waitin' till th' time is ripe. I thought I'd wait till after her father had got his sweet-corn money from th' cannin'-factory; for then they'd all be in better fettle. But I'm cock-sure or I wouldn't be doin' this," and he jerked his thumb toward the poor old trunk. "Why, them plaster-of-paris kittens my mother give me when I was seven years old ain't been off'n that shelf up there fer ten years. So, I guess I'm pretty sartain, eh?"

I believed so and said so, and asked him to let me know when it was all settled. For I saw he was entirely in earnest, and I knew I should feel badly for him if he failed.

"Well," he declared after a brief pause, "ter put it in a nutshell, I'll keep ye posted." And his eyes again lighted up. "When I come in on the night I'll rap twice on yer door. That will mean it's all hunky-dory. Two raps, mind ye."

But although I was awake when he stumbled up the narrow stairs that night and for many nights